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Walhalla

A Poem by Frank Graziano

Walhalla

Frank Graziano

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South Carolina Arts Commission
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for Laura

Kiss

the mouth
which tells you, here,
here is the world.

— Galway Kinnell

1.

I thought all along
a part of us was sleeping.
I felt a word,
the gentleness of light
on my tongue, I felt your face

feeling something was wrong.
One kiss once
subtle as sekushi,
one face half lit
in the pillow's arms,

like a pollen-drunk moth
dipping down
into the dogwood
your lips opened
then fanned into the softest wind,

you are the poise
of the monarch
I couldn't net that summer
behind Oceanside Rescue Station
Number One, it took
a hell of a nerve

to speak out then,
the colors too fragile
to touch. Let us die
with this taste of music
in our mouths.

2.

I didn't mind the daffodil
tulip hubbub, it was the six
dollar admission

that turned me off, I don't give a damn
whose mansion. Pinchot's is the only breath
worth remembering, but I'll recall

the wrens that were indifferent
as stones
when you undressed, there, in the afternoon,

I thought the world,
I thought my life was soft.
There was a silence
like snow
settling on my blood
there was inside me an unearthly autumn.
And it was nothing
but the sound of water
where it stops; drops dead

in the middle of Keowee Lake
and reflects and inverts
the forest. *We're backward*, I think
in the fury of my sleep, and tumble
and leap from dream
to dream

like a child unleashed
in all of his youth
running stone to stone
in a stream.

3.

And we ran that stream.
I don't know if you have rolled
in your uneasy sleep
onto the gray
that rises when the granite
opens, onto the ghost

of your father
who bought Satulah Mountain,
a name that feels good in my mouth.
He is the dead moon
wobbling just ahead
of your earth
like a white-painted Cherokee
scout. I think you carry him
with you through the rotting oaks
that crumble
even if we look at them wrong
and I have looked
and I have seen you

crumble. It is a fear
I have seen
settling on your coat, a shadow
in which a threat is crouching

like a seed, it is the sun
that limps
like a turtle full of light
and creeps
and weaves through the trees.

If I had it

I would give you the stillness
of growth that makes the black trees
fixtured to the side
of the sky
not even long to stir.

4.

Once when I came home
from Cuernavaca
we hiked along out of breath
into Reddington Pass
and you undressed
kind of bashfully like a budding
girl, I saw Walhalla
written on your cheeks.
And I saw it once, I think,
halfway
when I was young,
when my grandfather
walked me though his garden
alone,

it was another
of those unsure Brooklyn days
when the sun came
up and took a healthy look
and went to hell
and hid in the clouds.

But he spoke
through the ribs of his tank
T-shirt
a few
of his few words no one remembers
and I can hear
his bronze voice
laced with Italian,

I can see the plum
tomatoes piled in the bushel,
and the terrace
not peeling where the tendrils coiled,

I can feel my fingers
hold a grape
to the sun
and rub against his unshaven face
that smiled and was ready to die
that summer.

5.

Walhalla

you are in Whitmire,
South Carolina, and in Utah and in eyes

I have touched
with my eyes, and in seabirds
most slow
and unreligious of ships,
and in onionweed
sprouting from the cracks
in boulders, not even giving a damn.

Walhalla

you are the thought
I am most afraid of, the doves
that rise when at last
they are dead
with water and silence
in their beaks.

And in the steam

the inmate wipes from a mirror, and the claw
of the fiddler
that gropes at the wind
when the gray gull drops it
toward the rocks.

Walhalla

even if I am a sucker
for your music, the *al*
sung twice
and then backwards in *la*,
even if I'll believe until there's nothing
to loose
and drop you like a birdcage
around my only
wife, I still hold faith
in the other side
of music

where the old oak drifts
more mute than a barge,
and ants, most pious of all
the insane, find sleep
asleep in their hearts.

6.

Laura, when you cried
last night
I felt my skeleton
wobble and I wrapped you with everything left
in my arms – we've rocked
like that
for too many hours
mumbling into the pillow
everything's ok — not even caring
I felt your hair
itch my face, we were alone

we were dreams
that feel out of bed, two gifts
that will never be given.
And understanding
I took this little bit
of life
and gave it away
to myself
and you
and we both broke down
and hugged it between us

and slept
like the two jagged halves of a promise
not even longing
to wake.

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